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ABSTRACT

The complex human and legal issues surrounding regular class placement of handicapped students have created some disagreement and confusion among teachers and teacher educators. The confusion is bound up with the issues of teacher biases, stigmatization of the handicapped, and the ability of untrained teachers to work properly with handicapped children. Whatever the issues, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act is now law, and the immediate need is for inservice education for teachers who have no training in special education. In addition, colleges and universities must be prepared to restructure the curriculum of teacher education programs to include special education. (DS)

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Briefly on . . .

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no. 2

Regular Class Placement

ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education • One Dupont Circle • Suite 616 • Washington, D.C. 20036

TEACHERS PREPARE FOR REGULAR CLASS PLACEMENT OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

Joan Dirksen*

The segregation of handicapped children in special classrooms originated some years ago from a recognition that while these children deserve an education, their needs are unique. Subsequently, however, concern developed over the potentially dehumanizing effect of segregating groups of people from the main stream of society; that isolation from their peers restricts handicapped children unfairly. The idea that handicapped children should be educated in the least restrictive setting appropriate to their needs gained momentum.

In many cases the least restrictive setting is the public school classroom. If, after referral and testing, a student is judged physically, emotionally, socially, and educationally capable of attending classes in school with other children, rather than being segregated in special groups, that student is transferred to the regular classroom and becomes the responsibility of the regular teacher.

Recent federal legislation reinforces this belief that handicapped children should be released from a too restricted environment. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (November 29, 1975), further mandates an individualized education plan for all handicapped children.

The complex human and legal problems involved in this new education concept have created some disagreement and confusion among teachers and teacher educators. Even terms to define it are a source of contention. While "regular class placement" is accepted as one description for educating handicapped children with their nonhandicapped peers, the word "mainstreaming" cropped up and stuck. Some educators cringe at this word which they feel is too simplistic to clarify a complicated subject. However, since the aim of the movement is to provide handicapped children with an educational experience that will enable them to become self-reliant adults, the term is not inapt: putting these children into the main stream of life is the ultimate goal.

The best of plans can be muddled by a scramble for the right word to point out what is to be done and how to do it. What is to be done has been legislated; doing it is the obligation of parents and educators. Here, too, there is dissension on how to implement the mandate--and even, in some cases, whether it is a good idea to begin with.

SOME PROS AND CONS

Negative reaction, while not overwhelming, is not completely absent. Some points have been made that merit consideration. Placing handicapped children in regular classrooms implies a climate of acceptance by the regular teachers. Yet teachers, like other people, have biases and prejudices; and if these concern handicapped children, the children may be faced with hostile attitudes where they neither expect nor deserve them.

Teaching the handicapped child requires extensive individualizing of instruction, and teachers are often limited in their capacity to meet all of the needs that may confront them. Furthermore, handicapped children, especially those with mental or

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emotional handicaps, may progress at a slower rate academically than nonhandicapped children. Consequently, they will often experience failure and stand out as different. The fear exists also that the handicapped child with special needs will divert the attention of the teacher to the extent that other children in the class will not progress as swiftly as they can.

Other reservations have been expressed by physical education teachers. The large size of the usual physical education class has been mentioned as a deterrent to individual attention. The wisdom of placing the handicapped child in a situation where physical safety is a factor has also been questioned. Valid as these arguments may be on the part of a public school physical education teacher, interesting developments in this realm are taking place outside the school. Administrators of national parks and community playgrounds are fully aware of the physical needs of handicapped children. New equipment and programs for the handicapped in physical recreation are being incorporated into the planning for these facilities.

Some educators argue that we are rushing into a significant change in practice without sufficient evidence of its superiority over old practice. The best type of classroom for the retarded child remains a point for debate; and the possibility exists in some minds that large amounts of time and money are being spent on what in the future may be regarded as a passing fad.

Many reasons in support of regular class placement have been offered. These appear to reflect the thinking of the majority of educators and others who are coping with the ofter emotional problem of the handicapped child.

Parents' concerns are being expressed with increasing force. Many never wanted their handicapped child segregated or "labeled." There is recognition of the potential harm of classifying students with such terms as "retarded" or "delinquent." The fairness and accuracy of psychological testing have been under parental fire, particularly in the inner city, where so many children are classified as retarded. Civil rights actions enter the picture here, since many special classes showed a disproportionate number of minority students.

From the humanistic view, it has been pointed out that without normal interaction, nonhandicapped and handicapped children may develop misconceptions about each other and never learn to interrelate. Children can be cruel when faced with the unusual. Like adults, they can also be emotional and, moved by pity, may overreact with concern and helpfulness beyond what is needed or wanted. Handicapped children want to have friends and playmates. They want to be accepted socially. They flinch from cruelty and may be demeaned by well-intentioned sympathy. It is hoped that increasing relationships between these students will develop compassionate values and mutual respect.

Many disabilities are subsumed in the broad term "handicapped." Unsavory though it seems to many people, children still will have to be evaluated and labeled. The severely mentally retarded child differs in needs from the slightly retarded. The physically handicapped child with normal intelligence presents the teacher with a different challenge from that offered by the child who is emotionally disturbed. Teachers trained to recognize the varying needs of children and the best methods of meeting them are an indispensable, possibly an endangered, species.

John Ryor, president of the National Education Association (NEA), warned of the possibility that school boards might use mainstreaming as an excuse for eliminating all special education programs from a school system. "How ironic it would be if a forward looking program meant to serve the nation's handicapped children should result in our disposing of those teachers best prepared to help them, at the same time adding another burden to the already pressured regular teacher and making it impossible for him or her to do much more than babysit" (7). Ideally, the special education teacher should work in close cooperation with the regular classroom teacher. In many cases a child will spend some of the school day in a regular classroom and some time with the special education teacher who can provide the individual instruction the child requires.

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The NEA issued a statement in 1976 on the circumstances under which regular class placement could be considered beneficial and the guidelines that should be followed in determining the means for making it successful. The NEA will support mainstreaming of handicapped children only when:

1. It provides a favorable learning experience for both handicapped and regular students.
2. Regular and special teachers and administrators share equally in its planning and implementation.
3. Regular and special teachers are prepared for these roles.
4. Appropriate instructional materials, supportive services, and pupil personnel services are provided for the teacher and the handicapped students.
5. Modifications are made in class size, scheduling, and curriculum design to accommodate the shifting demands that mainstreaming creates.
6. There is systematic evaluation and reporting of program developments.
7. Adequate additional funding and resources are provided for mainstreaming and are used exclusively for that purpose.

The important role of school administrators comes to the forefront in most of these areas. Without support and full understanding, on the part of these supervisory personnel, of the legislation's goals and the means of achieving them, it will be difficult or impossible for regular class placement to function successfully.

REEFS AND SHOALS FOR TEACHERS

The impact on regular classroom teachers is clear. The daily responsibility for all of the children in the classroom falls on them. Although regular classroom teachers may have had some training in the education of the handicapped, many will not have the expertise to prescribe learning experiences for all handicapped children. Most teacher education institutions require courses in educational psychology and child development, but these can hardly be considered adequate in preparing teachers to meet all the special educational and emotional needs of the handicapped. Specific training for teachers is necessary to assist them in handling the needs of handicapped children while at the same time remaining aware of their responsibilities toward their non-handicapped students.

Some teachers, experiencing the problem of dealing with handicapped children for the first time, have inner reactions of near panic. One teacher, unprepared for the special techniques required in such a situation, said, "I pray a lot." Prayer is undoubtedly good for the soul, but sound training in this case is more practical.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) supports the intent of PL 94-142. It has recommended, however, that some changes be made for the protection of teachers. Funding of sound inservice training for teachers is under discussion. AFT is watching closely the extra burdens and responsibilities teachers must assume. It is also keeping a wary eye on demands--such as that certain children achieve stated goals--that may be unrealistic or unfair. This organization is prepared to come to the aid of a teacher pressured unduly by administrators.

Special educators who have extensive experience in programming for handicapped children will now be dealing with these students in a segregated setting much less often. Cooperation between special teachers and regular teachers will be essential.

SHIFTING GEARS FOR ACTION

Since a certain amount of urgency attends compliance with a government mandate, some changes need to be made quickly. The initial push in teacher training will have to be inservice programs, so that teachers who are already working can be trained. The goal of such training should be to give teachers the knowledge and skills they need to implement individualized instructional programs for all their students.

One typical inservice training program already developed and evaluated used an intensive workshop designed to equip teachers with diagnostic, remedial, and behavior management skills relevant to regular class placement of handicapped students (1). These skills included increased abilities to instruct the mildly handicapped in the regular classroom, to modify use of teacher authority, to encourage greater student responsibility in school matters (such as helping other students), and to facilitate increased student-teacher dialog.

The success of this program indicated that specific skills related to the instruction of mildly handicapped children can be taught to elementary teachers in a relatively short period of time. One tentative conclusion from this program was that developing and practicing specific

skills in an action-oriented setting may be a more productive approach to educating elementary teachers in special education techniques than traditional university courses, which tend to remain at an abstract level.

However, colleges and universities must be prepared to restructure the curriculum of teacher education courses. An integrated approach between regular and special education departments is one solution.

At Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Special Education is a part of--not apart from--the Department of Education (3). The Special Education faculty has provided inservice training for the Regular Education faculty. Workshops, seminars, and released time for faculty study have been initiated. The education faculty feels that by so integrating they are modeling some of the concepts that will be expected of public schools. The theory is that if placing the handicapped in regular classrooms is to succeed, present organizational patterns in colleges and universities of teacher education must work for greater integration of all human service areas in education personnel training programs.

The Bureau of Education for the Handicapped recognizes that institutions of higher education need funding to respond to PL 94-142. BEH has awarded approximately 100 "Dean's grants" to colleges and universities trying to revise teacher education curricula so that regular education personnel will be able to teach special children more effectively.

Looking to the future, some states are already changing their certification regulations to include in the college or university curriculum required courses in special education for the handicapped child.

University professors who will be asked to provide inservice training for the public schools may be in need of much inservice themselves. Until teacher educators assume the responsibility for preparing teachers to meet the special needs of all children, regular class placement has limited chance for success. All teachers must be trained to deal effectively with all individual differences.

There will always be some children for whom the regular classroom is not the least restricted environment. Mainstreaming will not work for them and they will follow their tributaries in their own ways. However, all teachers, parents, and teacher educators are charged with the responsibility of seeing that these children, like all children, will receive the best our society can give them.

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